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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an ethnographic study of four intern pairs in a specific local setting to explore the effects of specific mandates of the New York State Mentor Teacher Internship Project (MTIP). Guidelines and regulations designed to be supportive of both mentors and beginning teachers were in conflict with local cultural norms and resources. As a result, program structures became an impediment to achieving basic program goals. Key characteristics of the state-funded MTIP program stood in contrast to a locally developed and funded predecessor. Problem areas were mentor selection and training, released time for mentors and interns, use of replacement teachers, and compensation for mentor duties. Mentors were reluctant to be part of a program that supplanted the local model. No financial incentives were awarded to mentors--a critical violation of the local cultural norm. Interns received negative faculty reaction to their reduced teaching load and, by deferring to other faculty as role models, occasionally experienced strained relations with their mentors. The use of replacement teachers to insure released time for the pairs was problematic since few substitute teachers were available. An analysis of these and other problems in the program offers the basis for suggested reforms. (JD)

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Understanding Context: A Key to the Design of Formalized Mentor Programs to Induct Beginning Teachers

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Paper presented at the 1990 meeting of National Council of States on Inservice Education. Orlando, Florida. November 16-20

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The New York State Mentor Teacher Internship Project (MTIP) is now four years old. Like many four year olds it has learned important lessons from experience, but has additional developmental needs to address. The purpose of the program is to support the implementation of induction programs for first year teachers in local school districts. The competitively funded projects encompass urban, rural and suburban settings whose populations and organizational structures reflect the diversity of the state. Experienced teachers who have demonstrated "superior pedagogical skills, subject matter skills, teaching abilities and interpersonal relationship qualities" (MTIP Guideilnes , 1990) act as mentors for first year teachers. The accumulating data in support of the program's success parallels that of other similar induction programs in the literature. This paper explores the effects of specific mandates of the state supported program on four mentor intern pairs in a specific local setting. Guidelines and regulations designed to be supportive of both mentors and beginning teachers were in conflict with local cultural norms and resources. As a result, program structures became an impediment to achieving basic program goals. Project planners at the state and local level need to give mindful consideration to context

variables in support of local reform and initiatives.

In previous study of the program Mager (1987, p. 106) reports:

> . . . not much is known about the interns and mentors who judged their experience negatively. Though it would seem their numbers were small, their views would have been important as sources of learning about the projects and the relationship...Knowing that some interns and some mentors had less than positive experiences can serve as a prompt for further study, and to increased sensitivity to that possibility among project planners, mentors and interns themselves.

The intent of this presentation is to serve as such a prompt to mindful consideration of the powerful impact of cultural norms and context variables on the adoption and adaptation of the Mentor teacher - Intern (MTIP) program and similar initiatives. This is of particular import and consequence as the proposed goal of mandated state wide adoption of MTIP by 1993 and the 100 million dollars in legislative funding that will be required for implementation come into consideration.

One of the strengths of the program often cited is the flexibility local school districts retain over program design. A variety of program designs have emerged, however, the effects of

specific reqirements of funding reported in this study suggest a need for greater awareness and consideration of their impact.

The Midway School District* is typical of many more rural distircts in New York State. The district MTIP program stands in the shadow of a previously developed local first year teacher initiation program. Key characteristics of the state funded MTIP program stand in contrast to Midway's locally developed and funded predecessor:

mentor selection and training

release time for mentors and interns

use of replacement teachers

and compensation for mentor duties

METHOD OF STUDY

An ethnographic case study of each of four intern mentor pairs allowed the researcher to characterize the relationships and to compare and contrast the experiences of like pairings (Mentor/intern) within a similar context . Several qualitative measures were used to determine the level of implementation and program effect. Data collection devices included daily logs and journals, semi structured interviews, direct observation of intern

teaching and mentor feedback sessions, monthly program meetings, a needs assessment and a structured evaluation session with all participants addressing open ended questions. The evaluation study of this program includes over 100 hours of participant observer data collection. Multiple measures were used to triangulate on specific implementation and outcome measures.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Where previously there had been a panel to determine readiness for mentoring the studied mentors were "persuaded" to mentor and as such did not demonstrate readiness. Mentors so approached had to wrestle with the the stigma of being part of a program that supplanted the local model. The dearth of teachers in the mentor pool was a direct result of the change of compensation from the preceding program. The reward structure for extra work had always been extra pay. This practice is prohibited with the intent of institutionalization of the mentor intern relationship by providing time for mentor intern interaction within the work day. No financial incentives are awaded to mentors. Lured by the financial support of the state money and release time, a critical local cultural cultural norm was violated

Although over 90% of Midway teachers had participated in a comprehensive staff development program 50% of the mentors had not previously enrolled. This put these mentors in a position of having to pick up the vocabulary of a basic tenet of the induction model as well as learn observation and feedback skills while trying to establish mentor relationships. It is well recognized that a variety of teaching models and strategies are acceptable and can be shared in the mentor intern relationship, without training in any one instructional model or vocabulary. The fact that these teachers had not previously participated in what is clearly a district priority was , however, a disadvantage. They were not formally selected by peers as substantive role models in the culture of the individual schools.

The accountability measures of the current design were not a feature of the previous model. There was considerable variability of compliance with demands for accountability measures. Interview responses indicate incidents of faculty outside the MTIP program encouraging interns to ignore such practices as logs and journals. Interns also reported "flack" from the faculty over their participation in an intern program and negative references to their reduced teaching load In fact, after several such incidents

interns questioned their status. There were other first year teachers in the district who were not in the program. Were the "specially chosen " Intern participants somehow lesser professionals than their contemporaries? Although they had formed relationships with their mentors they were not unaware of the status of the mentors in the eyes of other faculty. In several instances interns deferred to the advice of recognized role models and experts on the staff rather than the paired mentor. This strained mentor intern relationships.

A review of the mentor and intern logs revealed expected areas of activity : direct assistance, lesson planning and review, preobservation, observation and post observation activities, discipline,and classroom management. There was considerable variability in the amount of time spent on designated program activities by mentor intern pairs. Use of designated release time varied similarly.

Those pairs which reported regular use of the release time for mentor intern interaction show a higher level of activity related to observation and feedback activities. Intern observation of other teachers varies similarly. Variability of the use of time is to be expected, however, a significant range of variability relates

to other interesting data. In teams reporting higher incidents of lesson planning and review, interns indicate less concern for planning and related time constraints. All interns report concern of planning and lesson design, however, those with more reported assistance show less concern by second semester. Time on task corresponds to reported intern concerns.

Most mentor intern time is spent in direct assistance: discussing procedures, policies, report cards, parent conferencing, etc. This is expected as the level of need of the interns and the level of comfort of the mentors with such concerns provide a convenient vehicle for both satisfying real needs and building the trust needed to sustain other mentor intern activities.

Training activities for mentors and interns were scheduled later than indicated in the original plan. A formal orientation to mentoring was conducted in late October and November Mentors were introduced to clinical observation and feedback techniques at this time. Additional formal training for mentors was conducted during the week preceding the Christmas holiday. Deviation from the funded proposal design was largely a result of late notification of funding and resulting time constraints coupled with reluctance of the staff to mentor without previous benefits. The use of

replacement teachers to insure the release time for mentors and interns was especially problematic for this district. The setting did not provide a readily available cadre of trained replacement teachers. Frequently, the replacement teacher was not experienced. As a result, the time allocated for mentor intern activities had to be devoted to communication , planning and training sessions with the replacement teacher. Scheduling release time and use of a replacement teacher was especially problematic at the elementary level where there was a self contained classroom. Attempts to reconcile the problems associated with the use of the replacement teacher were unresolved

Scheduling constraints and irregularities were also of concern and contributed to the variability of the use of time by mentors and interns.

Additionally, interns and mentors reported stress as a result of untimely notification and scheduling of supporting activities. Interns were expected to participate in a district staff development program on consecutive Saturdays during the first semester. Although the value of the content was recognized, the timing was viewed as an intrusion into planning and unscheduled personal time activities.

Principals also gave various levels of support to the program increasing the role confusion of mentors and interns despite the collegial nature and intent of the model. If the model is not valued by the principal there is a less chance that it will become part of the institutional fabric of the building.

Despite the findings above, interns and mentors generally reported satisfaction with the concept of a formalized mentor intern program. If relationships were at time strained they were also sustained by a genuine concern for the interns and the reciprocal gratitude of the interns for someone to "be there for me"

Perhaps the story is the story of the Ugly Duckling. Misplaced in the nest of the duck he assumes the mother duck to be his mother. As Langer points out in Mindfulnesss (1989) this is his first mistake-a premature and inaccurate cognitive commitment to understanding the context.. When the ugly duckling runs away in response to the taunts of his peers he thinks that he is so ugly that even a pursuing dog won't eat him because he finds the duck so repulsive as a meal. It's only when he recognized his reflection that he is freed to see the impact of context on his beliefs.

Similarly legislators project planners and other would be reformers are lured to a mindless ignorance of the context in which they seek to implement initiatives.

Conclusion

Mindful consideration of the implementation of induction programs involves a thorough consideration of the critical attributes of successful induction programs **and** the cultural norms of local context. In the case presented , critical attributes of mentor readiness and the mentor intern relationship were neglected while the existent reward structure was violated. Consideration of the context variables that determine status, real and perceived expertise, and the recognized reward structure is another way of recognizing the importance of the mentor - intern relationship . Staff developers have a key role to play in transposing induction models without distortion of the critical attributes. Designing locally appropriate Mentor Teacher-Intern Programs involves knowledge of the components of successful programs synthesized from the literature and an analysis of context.

References

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